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AUTHOR Zucker, George K.
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ABSTRACT

A writing exercise used in one college-level introductory Spanish literature course has been found helpful in converting student frustration into a challenge and changing perceptions of the teacher from adversary to ally. When the first reading assignment is due, the teacher tells the students how frustrating the class can be and lets them begin the class session with a 10-minute writing exercise, which can be anonymous, outlining questions and gripes. Subsequent assignments can be couched in terms of the students' concerns. The exercise has also revealed to the teacher some unanticipated problems with the readings, particularly concerning conventions of Spanish prose and dialogue. In other situations, the written reactions have helped accelerate introduction, discussion, and clarification of specific issues in story construction and meaning. Eventually, student comments contained few complaints but focused more on student skills in discovering theme and comprehending text. It is concluded that this method accelerates the comprehension process, increases student sophistication, helps the teacher focus instruction, and improves the teacher-student relationship. (MSE)

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STUDENT WRITING AS A TOOL FOR STUDY OF LITERATURE

George K. Zucker
University of Northern Iowa

The single most difficult course for an undergraduate Spanish major is the first "Introduction to Literature" class. It presents students with a number of problems. Today's students are accustomed to literature in the form of movies rather than as the printed word. Reading, pretty much limited to work assigned in school, is a retention exercise. But that's not how literature is, or should be, read. Therefore, they need to build a new reading skill, with the concomitant large addition to their vocabulary. In addition, because the literature is in a language other than the students' native language, they are often ignorant of connotations and nuances of the text.

There is also the problem created by the way in which Spanish abbreviates--by leaving out words, as much in writing as in speaking. Some common examples are a que, which is really apuesto a que 'I bet that'; a ver, short for vamos a ver 'let's see'; and puede que, the abbreviation for puede ser que 'maybe'. We teachers are so accustomed to this type of abbreviation that we no longer realize that words are missing, and so make no mention of that fact in the class. The students, though, still neophytes with the Spanish language, look up every blasted word in a sentence--even the ones they already know--and the sentence still makes no sense. The anger produced by that frustration is generally directed against the person who makes the student go

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through this frustrating experience. Pity the poor student, in such a situation with that adversary in front of the class room.

Add to that frustration and anger the need to look up roughly every third word of the assignment, sometimes looking up the same word twelve or fourteen times. Then, as a consequence of interrupting the reading to look up so many words, one forgets what has been read, so that it is necessary to reread the assignment at least once. That miserable teacher is a real enemy --a deliberate obstacle to the student's completing a Spanish major!

Student writing can be the magic formula which changes the anger and frustration into a feeling of challenge, and converts the teacher from adversary to ally. When the first assignment is due, tell the students that you realize how frustrating this particular class can be, and let them start the class session with a ten-minute writing exercise--which may well be anonymous-- outlining their questions and gripes. (In "Introduction to Literature," I allow them to write their commentaries in either English or Spanish. However, if the procedure is used in more advanced literature courses, the students could be instructed to write in Spanish, since by then they will have command of the necessary technical vocabulary.)

In reaction to the complaints about the number of words it was necessary to look up, you can point out that, with all of those interruptions, they will need to read the entire assignment a second time for continuity. You have now let the students know that you realize the amount of work involved in this course, thus

implying that you will keep assignments reasonable. Your expressed sympathy, not to mention your letting the students get their gripes off their chests, turns you into an ally--one who knows how difficult it is to achieve the next necessary step in completing a Spanish major, and who has demonstrated willingness to help them achieve that progress. And we all know that students will do much more work for an ally--without complaint--than they will for an enemy, regardless of that enemy's hold over them.

Have you ever had one of those class sessions where it seemed as if nobody understood anybody else? A student asks a question which you proceed to answer, except that the student's reaction to you answer makes it clear that you didn't understand what the student really wanted to know. That sort of thing happens with disturbing frequency in literature courses--especially the first one that the students take. Again, student writing about the assignment can help to cure those problems. For example, I began one of my classes with an assigned essay by Julio Camba, one which was written as a dialogue between two people. Discussion just couldn't seem to find a focus during the first post-reading session. Then I read the student reactions and discovered that they had no idea of how many people were involved in this essay. A quick look back at the text showed me the problem. In English, we use quote marks to indicate conversation. In Spanish, though, dashes are often used, and that was the case here. The students had no idea that they were reading dialogue! Thus, a comprehension problem that would have persisted was able to be cleared up with a 2-minute explanation of the three kinds of

symbols that Spanish uses to indicate dialogue. But it was a comprehension problem that I discovered only through student writing.

From the essay, I moved to a series of short stories so that I could introduce the students to the concepts of plot, theme, characterization, description, chronology, and point of view. Having the students regularly write a five- to ten-minute reaction each time a new assignment was due certainly helped to accelerate class progress in understanding--and, therefore, appreciating--literature as an artistic phenomenon.

Their second assignment brought the expected complaints about the number of words they had to look up, but there were also questions about the number of diminutive terms used, about the description of areas outside the setting for the story. A few students even mentioned that, while they were able to follow most of the story, there were parts about which they were not sure. Student comments took us naturally into a discussion of plot. What great progress after only two days of discussing an assigned literary work in class!

The reading in question was the story "Agueda" by Pío Baroja, the story of a physically deformed, but very talented, girl, whose existence was regularly ignored by both family and friends. However, her deformity is mentioned only once, briefly, as part of one sentence in the third paragraph of the story. Consequently, the students overlooked that point in their reading. The remainder of the story is told from Agueda's point of view, so the deformity is not mentioned again. My students wound up very fond

of the story because it sensitized people to the problems of people with deformities.

By the fourth story, student comments nearly eliminated complaints about the words they had to look up. Their attitude had changed, as can be seen by this remark: "There were lots of new and different words, which was good." Concerns now centered on the students' inability to discover theme on their own.

The following story, "El encaje roto" by Pardo Bazán, included flashbacks and a good deal of description. It took longer to read than had previous assignments, but repeated readings were now taken for granted. One student remarked, "I had to read it two-three more times than the others to pick up on all that happened."

By the time of the midterm, eight weeks after the beginning of the semester, the students were able to handle successfully an exam which required them to show how plot could be used to find theme in one of three given stories, and to discuss processes of direct and indirect characterization. It was difficult to believe that these were the same students who, eight weeks earlier, could not tell how many people were talking in a dialogue!

I can assure you that I had never been able to get students to this level of literary sophistication in such a short time without the use of student writing about their assignments. The commentaries told me exactly how to focus class discussion to resolve the questions and problems that the students were finding in their assignments.

By the second half of the semester, it was so clear that I was an ally that some of the commentaries included frank apologies for not having completed an entire assignment. There were also very matter-of-fact statements that some assignments had not really become clear until they were read for a third time.

The last two stories, "El milagro secreto" by Borges and "Axolotl" by Cortázar did not upset the students as they played with time and planes of reality respectively. By "Axolotl," one student commented. " . . . the events don't take place in order. However, from our discussion about time in the other stories, I knew what to expect from this one and didn't have any problems with it."

We finished the semester with the novelette, San Manuel Bueno, mártir, by Unamuno. We used the Austral edition--a book published in a Spanish-speaking country for Spanish-speaking readers. It was an observable boost to student morale to realize that they had progressed to the point that they could read such a work (albeit with the aid of a dictionary) and did not need a special text edition.

Literary matters had been discussed as they arose during the course, thanks to the student commentaries, so that it was not at all difficult to apply all of those concepts to the novelette--plot, theme, characterization, description, language level. Discussion did not sound like an "Introduction to Literature" class because of the insight and sophistication that the students displayed.

Student writing in reaction to reading assignments in a literature class serves many purposes beyond the obvious practice of the writing skill. For the students, it lets them vent their frustrations and helps to point out that the instructor is an ally. Because of its anonymous nature, it allows students to ask questions and make remarks to which they might not give voice in public. For the instructor, it organizes class discussion so that the topics covered are the ones on the students' minds at that time. Because of their immediate relevance, the concepts are quickly absorbed and students can generalize them to subsequent works. That fact allows class time to be used to move ahead in the study of literature rather than to review matters which have already been discussed. While this report contains illustrations specifically from the first required literature course, the principals are just as easily applied to more advanced literature courses.